

PRE-ACHAEMENID SILVER PHIALE DECORATED IN REPOUSSE

Achaemenid-Empire, late 7th-early 6th century B.C.

Silver

D: 30.8 cm

Reference: 6277



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Phiale (shallow drinking vessel) larger than the average size and perfectly circular. The shallow bowl has a strongly flared rim; it was hammered from a single thin sheet of silver. The decoration is entirely made in repoussé from the inside and/or from the outside. The central medallion is now lost, but traces of lead suggest that a metal element (gold or silver), rather than a semi-precious stone or glass paste, was placed there. A multi-petaled rosette encircles the center, framed by the main frieze composed of a garland of alternately opened and closed lotus flowers, connected together by hook-shaped stems. Large ovolo moldings, deeply hammered from the inside and topped with stylized lotus flowers, complete the decoration; when placed on a flat surface, each element of this outer frieze touches it and therefore serves as a support for the vessel. A short inscription in Neo-Elamite cuneiform script is engraved on the rim of the phiale. Probably indicating the name of the owner of the piece and that of his father, it reads Adda-Sapir, son of Sapparrak. Father and son are known from other silver inscriptions, but their status is never given, although they obviously were important figures in the contemporary Median society (civil dignitaries, military officers, religious officials, wealthy merchants?) to own such luxury items.

Phialae are among the most attested and ancient forms of the eastern repertory, especially regarding toreutics. Made of various metals (silver, but also bronze or gold), these phialae exist in different shapes, with a more or less shallow or wide body, and in varying sizes; they may be adorned with ovolo patterns (like here), fluting and/or friezes of palmettes, with figural scenes or sometimes plain and undecorated. The importance of this luxury tableware is confirmed by the Persepolis reliefs (admittedly more recent than our specimen), on which some of the foreign dignitaries represented offer tableware, certainly made of precious metal, as a gift to the Persian Great King; among these vessels are many phialae similar to our example.

CONDITION

Complete vessel, virtually intact, despite small deformations. Wall of

the metal partially pierced, probably due to wear; traces of green oxidation on the rim and on the central part, perhaps due to contact with bronze objects.

PROVENANCE

Sotheby's, New York, December 17, 1996, Lot 165.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOARDMAN J., *Persia and the West*, London, 2000, pp. 184 ff.

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